Notes/details on Lessons Lost series for "Scoop of Year" nomination

(This is based on material submitted for other contests)

Background on partnerships involved

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter Erin Richards completed much of her work on "Lessons Lost" while on an O'Brien Fellowship for Public Service Journalism at Marquette University during the 2017-18 academic year. The program included support from a group of student research assistants: Patrick Thomas, Sean Blashe, Diana Dombrowski and McKenna Oxenden. All of their work was conducted under the direction of Journal Sentinel editors.

Richards also worked on the project before and after the fellowship ended. Other contributors to the effort included data reporter Kevin Crowe, photojournalist Angela Peterson, and interactive developers Andrew Mollica and Erin Caughey, all of the Journal Sentinel staff.

How did the story come to light?

Over more than a decade of education reporting at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, reporter Erin Richards often found herself hearing variations of the same comment from teachers when she asked them about why it is so hard to improve educational outcomes for children:

"You don't understand," they'd say. "I start the year with 30 kids, and I end the year with 30 kids, but it's not the same 30 kids."

Richards set out to understand.

Her effort launched a massive undertaking by a team at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel to obtain and analyze a never-before-released database that tracked student-by-student movement among Wisconsin schools and to illustrate the causes and consequences of churn through the stories of individual families and schools.

Their reporting showed student churn drives a hidden crisis that is ravaging prospects for educational improvement. Each year, 22,000 students shift schools, often mid-year. That amounts to 1 in 4 students in the Milwaukee school system. In some individual schools, the annual turnover tops 40 percent.

While school choice proponents tout the virtues of easy movement, the vast majority of students are cycling from one low-performing school to another. What's more, even if a student in a high-churn school stays put, their performance can suffer.

Their work is groundbreaking in every sense of the word.

What obstacles, if any, were overcome in this work?

To understand student movement among and between Milwaukee Public Schools, the private schools that educate children on publicly funded vouchers, and independent charter schools, we needed student-level data from the state department of education. No other media outlet had ever won access to the data in Wisconsin – or has been able to gather it from other states to perform a definitive analysis of who is moving where.

After months of negotiations, we obtained the data – 13 years of mobility and performance information for nearly 2 million students – by agreeing to work with a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and to undergo university-level training on handling the personal data of children and receive Institutional Review Board approval.

Ultimately, we had to store the database on a secure server in the cloud so no one in our office, beyond Kevin Crowe, our data reporter, could access it. We also agreed to run our methodology – but not the finished product – past the education department's staff and lawyers to assure readers could not piece together the identities of any specific students.

We took this extremely seriously. For example, we graphically displayed the mobility of students in a cohort from Carver Academy, a low-performing school that has received millions in extra support from foundations, as they moved from third through eighth grade. We were able to do so by concealing certain information about the students, such as gender and race, as well as the school years the analysis covered.

But numbers alone would not tell the story. It had to be rooted in people.

Richards spent months looking for families we could write about. (We were forbidden from using the student-by-student data in this way; we had to find families through other methods, such as ride-alongs with church volunteers.) Meanwhile, it took nearly a year of painstaking discussions to convince always-skittish Milwaukee Public Schools officials to allow her into Carver.

Please describe any innovative techniques used in reporting or telling this story.

As noted, getting access to the data required ingenuity on our part. Analyzing the data – millions upon millions of individual records – presented its own challenges.

Among them: Accounting for the many ways a student could leave a school naturally (ie. moving from elementary school to middle school) and distinguishing those movements from unnatural ones (ie. mid-year transfers). What's more, they had to account for changes within the schools themselves – for instance, changing from a middle school to a K-8 school. In other cases, schools closed, opened or were reconfigured by the district. This was especially problematic when it

comes to independent charter schools and – for the most recent years – voucher-funded students in private schools.

While the data work was extensive and challenging, we were determined to present it in a way that is accessible to readers, with data visualizations, narrative stories, searchable tables and more. Getting to the final product took sophisticated investigative reporting techniques, skilled data analysis and old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting

If applicable, how is this work distinguished from previous or competing reporting on this subject?

Our project is groundbreaking for the depth of the quantitative approach.

We were able to obtain and analyze more than 12 million lines of student-level data for all of Wisconsin's students over 13 years. We combined that with state test scores and school report card scores and showed the negative impact on achievement for students who moved – and how the churn is concentrated among the lowest performing schools in Milwaukee.

In addition, no outlet has ever done a national analysis of how states track turnover. Our effort found, among other things, that half the states don't make the rates public at all.

Two recent projects examined more narrow aspects of student transiency:

In 2018, the Oregonian's "Reading, Writing, Evicted" project explored how fast-rising home prices were driving families out of their neighborhoods and causing children to switch schools.

Later in 2018, Chalkbeat (an education news site) published a series focused on student turnover in Detroit's schools. That project hinged on interviewing every eighth grader in one school to track how many different schools the children had attended. They also received some help from academic researchers to draw larger conclusions about rampant student movement in Detroit's school-choice rich landscape.

It is important to note that our effort began well before either of these published (The Chalkbeat story was posted within days of ours). Efforts to obtain the data were underway many months before Richards began working in earnest on this project during her O'Brien Fellowship in the 2017-18 academic year.

What makes this work explanatory? Please describe how it demonstrates mastery of the subject, lucid writing and clear presentation.

As we approached this project, we had two mantras:

Focus on the why as well as the what.

And don't just tell. Show.

The primary purpose of Lessons Lost is to explore and explain a hidden problem that undermines efforts to improve schools. Unlike many stories typically entered in this category, it is fundamentally an explanatory piece.

The issue of school churn has received some attention in academic circles, and a few districts have tackled it in an ad hoc way. But most teachers and principals do not realize the corrosive impact of such student transfers. Or, if they do, they don't understand the extent of them.

The Lessons Lost project put all of the pieces together and has made the topic a central among policy makers, families and educational leaders.

Wisconsin's new governor has talked about the series and its impact in policy meetings. Education leaders here and other states have asked our data team to explain how we tracked students into different schools -- they need to know how to better understand the movement of their own students.

In Milwaukee, a group of community members launched a campaign to help raise awareness about the importance of picking a good school and sticking with it over time. Others are working to bring an innovative nonprofit group – one we wrote about – to the city to help parents navigate the system.

Both of our mantras came together in the story of Shana Sykes.

Sykes is a 34-year-old single mother of seven children, ranging in age from 4 to 19. She is a walking crisis: Poor, jobless, struggling with mental health issues. She has been to eviction court nine times in 15 years, juggling disability checks in a losing effort to stay in her home.

In the past two years, the family has lived in five different houses and her children have collectively attended nine different schools. The oldest, Rayshon, attended 14 schools before he was able to graduate in May 2018 from an alternative high school.

Shana Sykes doesn't drink or smoke or use illegal drugs. She said she experienced the wreckage of alcohol and abuse as a child. Instead, she tries to build bonds between her children and is fiercely protective of them. She realizes they are on the same path she travelled. In her words:

"I don't want the kids to stay here and get stuck like me."

Low-income mothers like Shana are often seen by educators as angry and unreasonable and volatile and obstructionist. They often are portrayed by the media that way as well. As Lessons Lost expertly showed, the real picture is more complicated.

But so critical to understanding.